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Secret service for all to see

THE British public, during one of its periodical fits of morality, is a model of calm and good sense compared to the ridiculousness of the United States Congress when it falls prey to a similar paroxysm. Here in America, we may just be emerging from one of these periodical fits.

I am thinking of how Congress (helped, alas, by the pseudo-James Bond idiocies of some of the former CIA command) has been able to dismantle the American intelligence organisation. This dismantling, in the name of reform, has been underway for about five years and isn't over yet.

That some of this house-cleaning was deserved and necessary goes without saying but the extent of this clean-up has so damaged American intelligence that it will be at least five, perhaps ten, years before there is any return to a semblance of the CIA's vaunted efficiency and even creativity. In the meantime...

During these fits of morality, the higher senses have a tendency to grow dull. Otherwise how explain the American claim to have a functioning secret service when the CIA must by law report its activities to eight committees of Congress? Or as Senator Daniel Moynihan, a member of that body's Select Committee on Intelligence, put it in a recent speech: "With what security are we to mount even the most routine clandestine activity when the law requires that eight committees, some 180 Congressmen, and almost as many staff members, be informed in advance?"

In addition, the rules of Congress permit any of its members to examine the reports and documents of any Congressional committee. If a Congress member wants to make the information thus received available to others besides himself, he can arrange it so that he commits no illegal act, even though the Press obtains this supposedly secret knowledge. It should be noted that while it is routine to investigate prospective CIA employees for security, and to keep tabs on them during their employment, no Congress member or committee's staffer need be cleared at all. His presence is his clearance. But, then, "quis custodiet...?"

Imagine, in British terms, if the same legal situation prevailed in Westminster as it does today in Washington and some of the gamier specimens of the Labour Left, profiting by the strategy now called "entryism," but which in an earlier day was called "boring from within," had the right to examine the files of House of Commons committees empowered with the right to oversee the nation's secret services.

Whatever the British situation may be (and it is to be hoped that it doesn't develop into the ghastly American model) it can be stated with some assurance, based on talks with former CIA officers whom I will name, that the present American capacity for counter-intelligence, covert action and clandestine collection of information is "close to ground zero."

The phrase is that of Hugh Tovar, former chief, CIA Covert Action Staff, who used it to describe his section's capabilities. The same phrase could be used, with no exaggeration, to describe the capabilities in the other two intelligence areas. Covert action occurs when Government A seeks to influence the policies and politics of Country B secretly, say, by supporting a newspaper friendly to Government A. Most Governments try to influence some other Government's policies, openly and covertly. After all, as Hugh Trevor-Roper once wrote: "Secret intelligence is the continuation of open intelligence by other means." At the moment, America lacks the "other means."

As for American counter-intelligence capability—on which the entire intelligence structure depends—here is the opinion of Newton S. Miller, former chief of operations, counter-intelligence staff, CIA: "Our nation does not have an effective counter-intelligence capability."

Meaning, in Miller's opinion, that neither the CIA nor the FBI is today capable of detecting or neutralising foreign intelligence activity—specifically by the Soviet and the Eastern Bloc—in America. If counter-intelligence is ineffective it raises the spectre that, in its presently weakened state, the CIA may have been penetrated by the KGB.

Some responsible people strongly believe that, after these years of public exposure and Congressional scrutiny of the CIA, the KGB may actually have infiltrated the agency to such a degree that the CIA may have been "turned around." It has been argued that revitalising the agency might only help the KGB. Whether these beliefs are based on knowledge or supposition I am unable to say, but if it is true that America lacks an effective counter-intelligence arm, the consequences are predictable.

As Richard Helms, CIA director from 1966-72, has said: "Counter-intelligence is terribly important, because without an effective counter-intelligence programme—both in the CIA and the FBI—the problem of double agents and infiltrators is insurmountable."

American intelligence—CIA and FBI—must contend with an enormous number of Soviet spies within the country today. Some 15 months ago, there were 1,500 Soviet and 700 Soviet bloc officials permanently assigned to America as diplomats, media and trade representatives and as staff personnel to international organisations. It is conservatively estimated that 40 per cent. of all Soviet-bloc representatives on overseas assignment are intelligence officers. This means that at any time there is a minimum of 600 Soviet-bloc agents legally in America.

That's not all. There are also the "deep operators," buried under illegal cover, who can come into the country as Soviet-bloc visitors, for example. Between 1977 and 1978, there were 60,000 such visitors. Of these, 14,000 were commercial, scientific and cultural delegates; the remaining 46,000 were crewmen who enjoyed complete liberty while their ships were docked in any one of America's 40 deep water ports. One "deep cover" agent recently discussed his career as an "illegal" in Canada and America at an FBI-arranged Press conference in Washington.

Can America emerge from its quagmire of guilt? The anti-intelligence lobbies, which have had a tremendous influence on Congress, are still working hard but their power may have peaked.

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Observers in Washington believe that the anti-intelligence hysteria of the 1970s is cooling down. Congress now has before it a so-called charter which attempts to legitimize the intelligence system. This 171-page Bill would, if enacted, "authorize the intelligence system of the United States by the establishment of a statutory basis for the national intelligence activities of the United States," according to its preambular clause.

This highly complicated proposal satisfies neither the liberal-Left lobby nor the pro-intelligence forces. The former opposes it because it fears the charter would re-create the CIA despite the rigid controls; the latter opposes the Bill because, it argues, rigid controls preclude a functioning intelligence service, that it is difficult to set up rules for an agency which must work in secret.

The Carter Administration, which hitherto has been a sharp opponent of the CIA, has modified its stance, due undoubtedly to events in Iran, Afghanistan, Nicaragua, South and North Yemen. It may even have been affected by the "interesting coincidence," as James Reston put it, that while almost everybody else remained, Soviet and East German diplomats managed to slip away from the Dominican Republic embassy party in Bogota just before the Colombian guerrillas marched in.

The most important question is Congressional opinion. There is some evidence that the legislative leadership is showing a willingness to understand that, in the words of Sidney Hook, "unsavoury and foolish CIA operations are not an argument for the abolition of the agency but for its improvement." The fit of morality is, perhaps, over; the debate is not.

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reports from America
on how Congress's fit
of morality destroyed
America's intelligence,
with repercussions in
Afghanistan, Iran and
the Dominican Republic